

Gray Rage: A Researcher's Dilemma

The general public seems to prefer (and accept) simple explanations for complex social problems—or at least that's what the people who create the explanations assume. The attraction of simple explanations is clear—they lead directly to obvious, and apparently potent, interventions. Hard science has traditionally valued “parsimonious” explanations. Physicists strive to summarize a large set of observed relationships with the simplest theory or smallest set of laws. Newton, for example, explained all motion, from a falling apple to the orbit of the planets, with three simple laws. Too often in the social sciences, however, commentators use just a single relationship or fact (and not multiple interweaving relationships) to characterize a complex problem. With only a single relationship to explain, the set of possible parsimonious explanations is quite large, permitting the explainers to select the one that best satisfies other, often political, criteria.

We have seen many examples of this phenomenon in recent years. In the field of juvenile justice, the most notable was the emergence of the “superpredator” theory to explain the juvenile violent crime arrest trends of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The fact was clear enough: juvenile violent crime arrest rates surged between 1987 and 1994, after almost 15 years of relative stability. The parsimonious explanation that pundits selected to explain this fact—chosen from among many possible candidates—was that juveniles then and there had changed: that our society was dealing with a new breed of young offender, one with no social conscience, whose DNA had been altered by drug and alcohol abuse, who would kill for a new pair of sneakers, who was beyond the control of the juvenile justice system. All of this thinking was captured in a single phrase: the juvenile superpredator.

The influence of this explanation can be seen in the effects it had on state legislation. Nearly every state in the nation revised its juvenile justice laws in the mid-1990s to facilitate the transfer of more youth to the criminal justice system. If the cause of the increase in juvenile violent crime arrests was internal to this new breed of juvenile offender after all—if economic, social, and other external factors had nothing to do with it—then the only reasonable course of action was to remove these youth from America's streets. Transfers to the criminal justice system (followed by long sentences in adult prisons) appeared to be the most effective way to accomplish this goal.



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There is a lesson in the rise and fall of the juvenile superpredator controversy: Concerned researchers must acknowledge their complicity in this and other such political campaigns. In this article, a researcher ponders the dilemma that arises when he knows his findings may be put to political use. ■

HOW TO CREATE A SOCIAL MYTH

Of course, not every simple explanation catches on the way the superpredator concept did. To sway decision-makers and the general public as thoroughly as the superpredator construct did during the 1990s, it takes more than surface plausibility; it takes a campaign. I would suggest that anyone interested in initiating such a campaign take the following steps.

Step 1: Find a fact, make a graph. It is helpful if the fact is essentially true and based on information from a credible source. It gives more credence to the pursuing argument. It also is helpful if the fact can be displayed by a graph. Ross Perot (or maybe it was Madison Avenue) popularized this technique with the American people. Graphs lend an air of scientific rigor to the fact.

Step 2: Add high-profile examples. Information consumers like war stories—specific examples that give a fact a face and a story line. And in a country of over 280 million people, finding a story to support any fact is not hard. It helps if the characters in the story are well known for other reasons (e.g., movie stars, athletes, or politicians). It also helps if the story is violent, lurid, or bizarre. The best war stories are examples that everyone remembers on first hearing and easily recalls when an explanation of the fact is needed.

Step 3: Mix in natural pessimism. People are naturally pessimistic. If the fact predicts that bad times are ahead, they are more likely to believe it. A Chicken Little story is more readily believed than a story from a kindly grandmother telling us everything will be all right. So if the fact is not apocalyptic, try to present the fact in a negative context. For example: “The stock market will soar in the next two years, but unless it is carefully monitored, this new wealth will cause your children to become slothful and the country will be at risk from foreign enemies.” The benefits of a negative prediction are obvious. If things go bad, you are a prophet. If they don’t, it’s because you sounded the warning and disaster was averted. Either way, you win.

Step 4: Give it a catchy title. In our sound-bite society, developing an easily remembered label to communicate your explanation is critical. A catchy title is the equivalent of a media sound bite. It captures in a word or short phrase all the nuances of the parsimonious explanation, enabling users to recall or reconstruct the details of the explanation with little effort. Think of the Iron Curtain, the Military Industrial Complex, the Population Bomb, the Domino Theory.

Step 5: Repeat as often as possible. Have you ever wondered why McDonald’s advertises when everyone knows who they are, what they sell, and how to recognize their establishments when you are driving past them? For one thing, it’s to keep the option of buying McDonald’s sandwiches close to the surface of your short-term memory—so that when a dining decision is to be made, the golden arches will pop to

mind. But another reason for advertising is that repetition builds credibility. The more often an idea is presented, the more likely people are to accept it. If you are trying to sell your explanation, work to have it repeated (in print, on talk shows, or in song) as often as you can.

The superpredator campaign did not neglect any of these steps. We all saw the graph of FBI data showing the large increases in juvenile violent crime arrests. TV stations across the nation, following the broadcast tenet "If it bleeds, it leads," began their news programs with vivid, sensational juvenile-crime war stories. Pessimists took grim satisfaction in predictions of a coming "bloodbath" resulting from increasing numbers of young superpredators entering their teenage years. Pundits visiting talk shows and legislative hearings repeated the trademark "superpredator" catchphrase at every opportunity.

And it worked. Along with transfers to adult courts and the use of long sentences in adult prisons to keep juvenile offenders off the streets, laws were proposed to ban families of convicted juveniles from federally supported housing, to prohibit convicted juveniles from receiving state grants-in-aid to support postsecondary education, and to restrict future gun ownership by adjudicated juveniles. While most of these proposals were never implemented, the superpredator campaign did change how the adult world viewed the younger generation and how the younger generation thought of itself.

Not surprisingly, public support for the juvenile superpredator concept is waning as juvenile violent crime rates plummet to their lowest levels in a generation. Even the original proponents of the explanation have stepped away from it. But some lingering effects of their parsimonious explanation can be seen in altered juvenile justice legislation and the juvenile system's disproportionate focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation and prevention.

THE DILEMMA

Now here is my dilemma, the reason for this discussion: I am hesitant to release a fact that I encountered in my research in the fear that it will plant a seed in the minds of some and grow into a full-fledged media campaign. Here is the fact:

My analysis of FBI statistics documents that between 1980 and 1999, arrests for violence and drug abuse increased more in one segment of the U.S. population than among juveniles. For example, while juvenile arrests for forcible rape remained constant, forcible rape arrests in this group doubled. More dramatically, while juvenile arrests for drug abuse violations increased 75 percent, arrests in this segment of the U.S. population nearly quadrupled. Who is this growing threat to our society? It is our senior citizens, people age 65 and over. And if the problem is bad now, just think what the future holds. In the next 20 years, the number of persons in this crime-prone group will increase substantially as the baby boomers pass into their retirement years.

I can see the press report now:

Recent FBI Data Point to Emerging National Threat

—*Washington, D.C.* A new and pervasive criminal element threatens the safety of American society. Our senior citizens are out of control, committing violent crimes and abusing drugs at soaring rates. And each day more join their ranks. To what can we attribute this dramatic increase in senior, or “Gray,” crime?

We do not traditionally envision Grandma and Grandpa in mug shots or in the dock at criminal trials. But the Grays of today are not the seniors of a generation ago. We fear juveniles because their immaturity and irrational behavior lead them to commit senseless crimes. Grays pose a far more sinister threat to public safety. Guided by rational choice and lifetimes of experience, Gray criminals are clever and calculating to an extent unimagined by our young people.

It is often written that many violent juvenile offenders expect to die by age 21. This hopelessness both drives their antisocial behavior and justifies their apparent disregard for the potential penalties meted out by our criminal justice system. But if the hopelessness of violent juveniles reduces the deterrent effect of the juvenile justice

system, what hope do we have of stopping the Gray menace? Even with the benefits of medical advances, most Grays can look forward to only a few remaining years. “Long” prison sentences will not stop Grays from breaking the law and committing violent acts. A life sentence to a Gray is like a day in detention to a youth.

Far from deterring Gray crime, the prospect of a life in prison actually may motivate many of these vicious oldsters. Some Grays commit crimes simply to obtain the necessities of life. If these Grays succeed, they may gain some short-term benefits. Paradoxically, if they fail, crime is their ticket to a secure and carefree existence—in prison.

The attraction of prison life will only increase when the social security system goes bankrupt and Medicare must employ triage to treat the nation’s elderly. Prison will be a haven to Grays—three meals a day, shelter from the elements, and free health care in an institution with geriatric units (thanks to our nation’s commitment to truth-in-sentencing laws and the resulting longer sentences) far better equipped than many nursing

facilities. And, of course, no Gray will feel abandoned or alone in our overcrowded prison system.

Huge expansions in the social safety net may reduce the motivation for some Gray crime. Pumping tax dollars into Medicare and social security might even gain the political support of the younger generations if these social programs were characterized as crime prevention programs. But not all Gray violence stems from need, and social programs cannot address violence bred by idealism. While drugs, money, or a desire for respect may incite some juvenile violence, the motivation behind future Gray violence lies much deeper. In the next 10 years, the Gray population will be swelled by persons who matured in the 1950s and 1960s, the Beat and hippie generations. When young, they had high ideals. They had the Lone Ranger, James Dean, the Summer of Love, and the Summer of Rage. They lived in the Age of Aquarius. They tried to save the Earth and free the Chicago Seven. They tuned in and dropped out, protested the war in Vietnam, and joined the Peace Corps. They learned as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to leave a campsite cleaner than they found it. As most of these naïve idealists matured, they were co-opted by the system. They moved to suburbia

and drove SUVs. In many this has left a deep-seated feeling of guilt. Now in their Gray years, they know they could, and should, have done more. They could have left the campsite cleaner. In the waning years of their lives, they have little time to clean the campsite. They must take action *now*. For many the action will be violent.

Without fear of retribution, Grays will turn to violence when no other solution is possible within the time available to them. Child abusers, polluters, attorneys, weak political leaders, boom-box carrying juveniles, used-car salesmen, and inconsiderate government clerks—all will feel the wrath of Grays. And woe to the son-in-law who abuses the daughter of a Gray father! Wrongs, as Grays perceive them, will be made right without concern for the lawfulness of the means. The idealism instilled in Grays in their formative years will emerge. Violence will become a tool of justice. The idealism of youth will become Gray Rage. America must face the reality of this impending time bomb, fueled by the Grays' need to be free from care and by the protest songs that still ring in their heads. Gray violence will dominate the front pages in the United States in a few years—*unless we act now*.

(Accompanying this story would be a picture: a grandfather in a jail cell with a smirk on his face and his hands clenched into fists around the bars of the cell door. One letter would be tattooed on each of the knuckles of his right and left hands, spelling out the phrase "GRAY RAGE.")

Once the Gray Rage notion takes hold, proposals to address the problem will appear. Building on the recent movement toward specialized courts (e.g., drug courts, gun courts), someone will propose a Gray court—essentially transferring all Grays out of the traditional adult justice system, following the argument that it was never designed to handle such cases. Gray courts will have a new array of sanctions available to them. To deter other Grays from committing crime, the courts will have the authority to abridge the social safety net available to law-abiding senior citizens, limit medical services, or exclude lawbreakers from federally supported housing. Assuming that Grays care deeply about the happiness of family members, another deterrence technique might be to levy sanctions against a Gray offender's family, perhaps limiting the aid their grandchildren could receive to support their college costs. Finally, someone will bring up the idea of limiting Grays' right to bear firearms.

Now, with the juvenile superpredator fiasco still fresh in my mind, this is my dilemma: Should I release my findings about Gray crime or keep them to myself for fear of what parsimonious explanation might capture the public's attention—and what social policies might result? As a researcher, am I responsible for the harm that comes from my research? Should I keep these findings to myself because of the potential injury that could come from mistaken (or even malevolent) interpretations of them? If scientists had done this, think of the advances that we would have lost. Most social systems (e.g., government, health care, education) employ checks and balances to prevent any one component of the system from causing undue harm. The courts check the executive and legislative branches of government. Insurers establish guidelines to control health-care costs. Standardized tests identify poor educational systems. But where are the checks and balances that would stop Grays from suffering undue harm from my findings?

While I've been pondering my situation, a possible answer came in the U.S. mail. In correspondence addressed to me, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) informed me that I was old enough to become a member of the group. As I read on, I learned about all the services available to me as an AARP member, including federal and state lobbyists who work tirelessly to protect the rights and defend the benefits earned by senior citizens (i.e., the Grays). I also learned that large numbers of fellow senior citizens belong and that through our unity (and annual dues), we would ensure that our rights and the privileges we have earned will not be taken from us by media hype and misguided political expediency.

So maybe I will release the news about the increase in Gray crime, knowing that when an erroneous (but parsimonious) theory is promoted to explain this fact, there will be people with the organization, power, and public relations savvy ready to expose its absurdity. I just wish that such a force had been there when the juvenile superpredator notion was gaining steam.